Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

POVERTY BAROMETER

September 2001

BACK TO SCHOOL:

For some, new lessons aren't the only challenge

Back to school. Those words spark a variety of emotions, ranging from excitement at the thought of seeing old friends again, to melancholy at the realization that another summer is almost over. For families living in poverty, however, a very different emotion can mark the weeks leading up to the resumption of classes: despair.

Families living in poverty struggle year-round to meet the expenses of daily living. The extra costs of outfitting their children for a new school year, and of enabling their children to take part in at least some of the extra-curricular activities that so many are able to take for granted, is a real struggle for impoverished families. For some, the struggle is too much; the children go without.

The table below illustrates "back-to-school" costs for supplies for children in grades 3 and Senior 3. These costs reflect competetive retail prices in Winnipeg; prices may vary in other regions of the province.

What Back-to-School Costs in Manitoba

Grade 3*		Senior 3*	
Item	**Cost**	**Item**	**Cost**
Basic supplies--paper, pencils, notebooks, binders, etc.	$21.06	Basic supplies--paper, pens, notebooks, binders, etc.	$27.08
		Calculator	$9.89
Art supplies--crayons, markers, scissors, etc.	$21.28	Geometry set	$3.47
Dictionary	$7.99	Dictionary	$11.95
School bag	$15.00	Combination lock	$4.89
Running shoes	$25.00	Running shoes	$65.00
Student fees	$20.00	Student fees	$25.00
Taxes	$9.14	Taxes	$17.12
TOTAL	**$119.47**	**TOTAL**	**$164.40**
*This list does not include any lunch fees, transportation fees, or fees for field trips and excursions.		*This list does not include fees for instrument rental (band), athletics, transportation, or field trips and excursions.	

What does back-to-school really cost?

The value of a dollar--especially a dollar's worth of expenses--
is inversely proportional to how much disposable income is available.

The chart on page 1 outlines the dollar costs of outfitting and sending a child to public school for one year. But how does that translate in real, human costs fo Manitoba families living in poverty? The following chart shows where a minimum-wage family of three spends its money.

Budget	*Monthly Average ($)*	*Yearly Cost ($)*	*% of Income*
Food	306.78	3,681.36	25.4
Shelter	430.00	5,160.00	35.6
Clothing	60.67	728.00	5.0
Transportation	113.50	1,362.00	9.4
Child Care	40.00	480.00	3.3
Recreation	71.83	862.00	5.9
Health Care	12.80	154.00	1.1
Household Operation	60.40	724.84	5.0
Education	15.67	188.00	1.3
Communication	28.67	344.00	2.4
Personal Care	27.90	334.94	2.3
Banking	9.58	115.00	0.8
Furnishings	26.83	358.00	2.5
Risk Management	0	0	0
Total	***1,207.63***	***14,491.56***	***100***

Source: "Acceptable Living Level 2000," Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

So, back to the question we posed at the top of this page: what does back-to-school mean in real costs fo families living in poverty? For a family of three—a single parent with two children, one in grade 3 and one in Senior 3—living in Winnipeg, the annual back-to-school cost of $283.87 equates to:

- 45.4 additional hours working at a minimum wage job at $6.25/hr (see page 4)
- almost one full month of the family's average food budget
- 10 months of basic telephone service
- two-thirds a month of rent or other shelter costs
- two and a half months of transportation costs

How do families cope?

In the spring of 1998, Winnipeg Harvest published a "Hunger Barometer" that, among other things, looked at the strategies people use to stretch their dollars when there simply aren't enough to go around. The most common strategies are outlined below.

Food: Eighty-five percent of the Hunger Barometer survey participants said that they saved money by visiting food banks or soup kitchens. Other strategies included going without food, shopping for specials, and using coupons.

Transportation: Many households save money by walking more often, and using public transit less often, or not at all. Almost half of the survey participants indicated that they could not afford the bus more than three times a week.

Clothing: More than a third of respondents said they save money on clothing by going without adequate apparel. Nearly two-thirds cut expenses by using and buying used clothing.

Telephone: Almost a third of households using emergency food assistance have had their phone disconnected to stretch money.

These are year-round income-stretching strategies for users of emergency food assistance programs such as Winnipeg Harvest. When increased demands - such as back-to-school - result in an even greater than normal shortfall in their incomes, families living in poverty have to work even harder at finding ways of making each and every dollar stretch as far as possible.

What needs to be done?

The task of eliminating, or even substantially reducing, the incidence of families living in poverty can seem overwhelming, but there are things that we as individuals, and as members of our broader community, can do. Contributing food, clothing, and school supplies for distribution to families in need is an obvious short-term response. But even more importantly, we have to work to ensure that all levels of government know that we are concerned about the situation, and that we expect and will support action to reduce the number of families living in poverty.

In *The Manitoba 2000 Child Poverty Report Card, Our Children, Our Future . . .* , the Social Planning council of Winnipeg identified a number of "agenda for action" strategies aimed at meeting both short-term needs, and delivering long-term solutions.

In order to meet the short-term needs of families living in poverty, we need to:

- examine employment and income assistance programs;
- end the claw-back of the National Child Benefit Supplement to social assistance recipients;
- increase other income supports to children and families to adequate levels;
- move the minimum wage to 60% of average Manitoba weekly earnings; and
- invest in local communities to foster development of the skills of residents in low-income communities to positively change their communities.

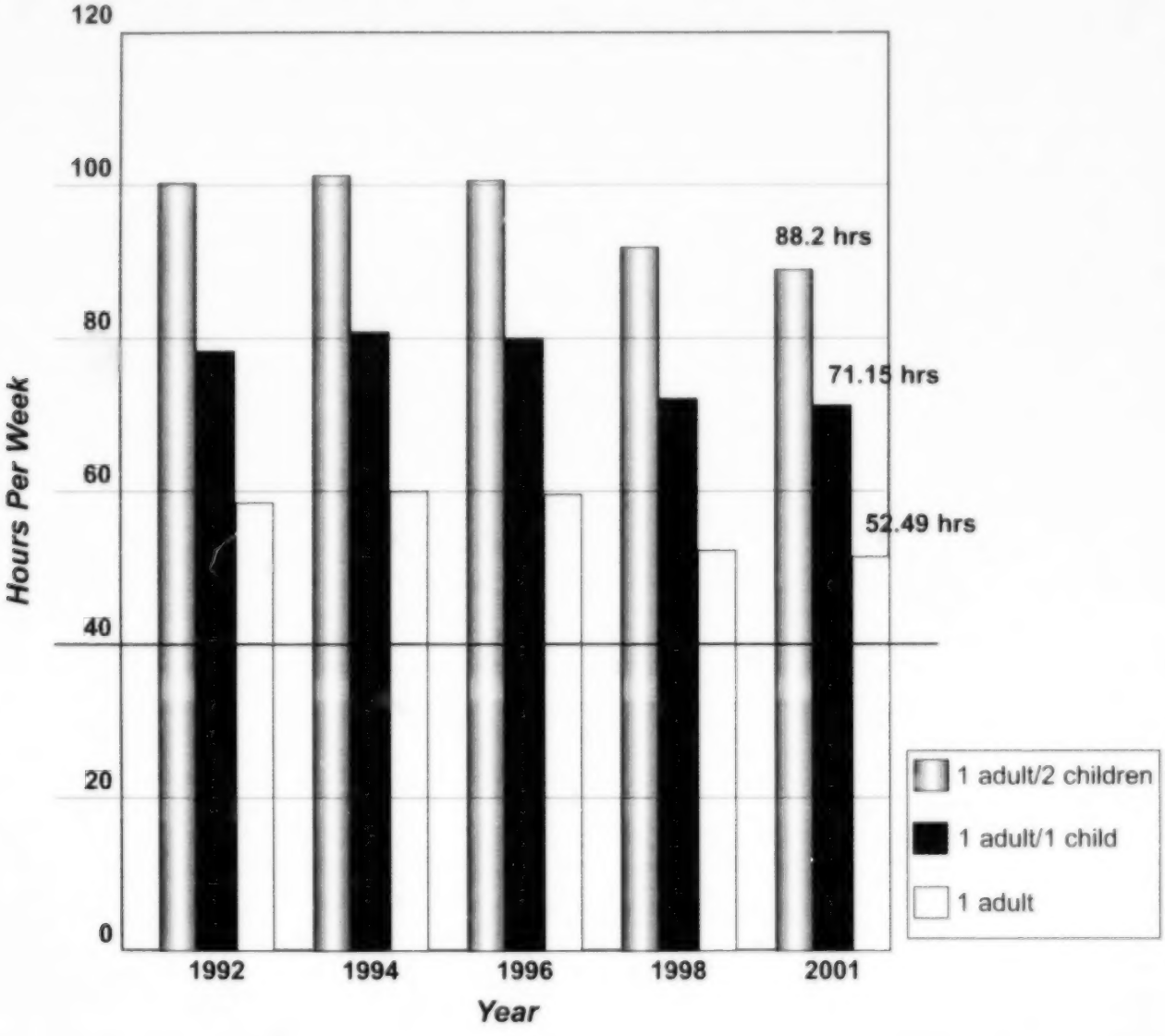
In order to find longer-term solutions to the issue of child poverty, we need to:

- enhance the child care system, and ensure that child care is available to all Manitoba children;
- improve access to adequate housing for families in poverty;
- improve access to training which will lead to long-term employment in adequately paying jobs, and provide the necessary supports to parents involved in such training; and
- develop a strategy for private and public sector job creation.

The full text of *The Manitoba 2000 Child Poverty Report Card* is available at www.spcw.mb.ca. Read it to learn more about how you can make a lasting difference.

How many hours of minimum-wage employment are required to reach the poverty line?

One option for working families living in poverty might be to work more hours at their jobs. But is that option a realistic one? The graph below looks at three types of families—one adult and two children, one adult and one child, and a single adult—and shows how many hours of minimum-wage employment would be required, each week, to bring the family income to the poverty line.



Poverty Barometer is an occasional publication of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.
The mission of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg is to provide
action-oriented leadership in social planning and effecting social policy changes.
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